



WHAT HAPPENED TO COVID-19 EDUCATION FUNDS?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government supplied schools with billions of dollars to mitigate the various impacts of the pandemic. The funds were to be used to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to the coronavirus.”¹ Yet some schools used these funds for pet projects, such as updating athletic facilities.

- **The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund received over \$190 billion over the course of the pandemic.**
 - The ESSER fund was established as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act on March 27, 2020 and provided with more funding in the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and again in the American Rescue Plan (ARP).²
 - ESSER funds were distributed to each state in proportion to the amount of federal funds states already receive under Title 1-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Of these funds, states were required to send at least 90 percent to local education agencies.³
 - This funding represents an unprecedented influx of federal dollars in K-12 education—the largest amount compared to any other year in U.S. history and more than 4 times the amount provided in an average year.⁴
- **The funds should have been used to support schools’ efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and continue to educate children.**
 - The Department of Education (ED) published guidance explaining twenty activities for which schools may use ESSER funds including preparedness to respond to COVID-19, “purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean facilities,” providing mental health support services, and other activities necessary to “maintain the operation of and continuity of services” at the school.⁵
 - Further, the CRRSA and ARP state that any school facility renovations should be initiated with the goal of “reducing risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards, and to support student health needs.”⁶ In ED’s explanation of using funds for renovations and construction, they detail the importance of indoor air quality and renovations for maximizing social distancing.⁷
- **Some schools used their ESSER for non-COVID related pet projects.**
 - In McAllen, Texas, the Board of Trustees for McAllen Independent School District approved a plan to use \$4 million in ESSER funds to expand the city-owned Quinta Mazatlan nature center, dubbed a “luxury birdhouse,” which the school claims will be used to teach students about ecology.⁸
 - In Kentucky, the Pulaski County Board of Education approved a plan to spend \$1 million of ESSER funds on their athletic facilities to install new cushioned track surfaces.⁹
 - In Whitewater, Wisconsin, the school board approved a plan to use \$1.6 million of the \$2 million they received in ESSER funds to construct synthetic turf fields for football, baseball, and softball.¹⁰
 - In Iowa, the Roland-Story Community School District school board approved a plan to use \$100,000 of their pandemic funds to renovate the student weight room.¹¹
 - In East Lyme, Connecticut, the school board approved a plan to use \$175,000 for repairing the drainage system at its baseball field.¹²

- **Congress has a responsibility to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used properly.**
 - Even Democrats, such as Representative Bobby Scott, admitted that ESSER funds were not intended to fund athletics, but to help schools “open safely and deal with learning loss.”¹³
 - Before considering further education funding, Congress should conduct proper oversight to ensure the funds were used for the purpose for which they were intended.
 - In the future, Congress should be more diligent when crafting requirements to ensure they are narrowly tailored to reduce the opportunity for abuse and waste of taxpayer dollars.

Publ. March 09, 2022

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<https://www.crs.gov/Reports/R47027?source=search&guid=421e20377544464a8e353eca34fc7813&index=0>

² “Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund.” Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at Department of Education.

<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>

³ Schwalbach, Jude. “Outsized and Opaque: K-12 Pandemic Education Spending.” Heritage Foundation. August 5, 2021.

<https://www.heritage.org/education/report/outsized-and-opaque-k-12-pandemic-education-spending>

⁴ Schwalbach, Jude. “Outsized and Opaque: K-12 Pandemic Education Spending.” Heritage Foundation. August 5, 2021.

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⁵ Frequently Asked Questions Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Programs.” U.S. Department of Education. May 2021.

https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/05/ESSER.GEER_FAQs_5.26.21_745AM_FINALb0cd6833f6f46e03ba2d97d30aff953260028045f9ef3b18ea602db4b32b1d99.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Program: Using COVID-Relief Funds for Facility Upgrades, Renovations and Construction.” September 2, 2021. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/09/Using-COVID-Relief-Funds-for-Facility-Upgrades-Renovations-and-Construction-09.02.21.pdf>

⁸ Gonzalez, Trevier. “McAllen ISD approves agreement that would pave way for \$4 million expansion of nature park.” KRGV.com September 14, 2021. <https://www.krgv.com/news/mcallen-isd-approves-agreement-that-would-pave-way-for-4-million-expansion-of-nature-park/> and Lanier, Ryan. “School districts are wasting COVID relief funds.” The Hill. November 7, 2021. <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/education/580477-school-districts-are-wasting-covid-relief-funds?rl=1> and “Welcome to Quinta Mazatlan--a luxury birdhouse!” World Birding Center. <http://www.theworldbirdingcenter.com/Quinta.html>

⁹ Slaven, Janie. “Pulaski school board approves application for turf football fields.” Commonwealth Journal. September 18, 2021. https://www.somerset-kentucky.com/news/local_news/b-pulaski-school-board-approves-application-for-turf-football-fields-b/article_83c1447f-c3ad-57aa-9271-8f1cf45c27a8.html

¹⁰ Lanier, Ryan. “School districts are wasting COVID relief funds.” The Hill. November 7, 2021. <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/education/580477-school-districts-are-wasting-covid-relief-funds> and Binkley, Collin and Foley, Ryan. “Flush with Covid-19 aid, schools steer funding to sports.” Associated Press. October 6, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-school-funding-sports-5b468b260ebd2593e53f03f9104d9bca>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Schools use federal pandemic relief funds to pay for athletics projects.” The Washington Post. October 6, 2021.

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